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ABSTRACT

This paper describes counselmime, a therapeutic cognitive-focusing technique for career and life style planning, in which mimes perform skits designed to heighten self-awareness, enhance communication, and enable viewers to cognitively restructure situations of psycho-social importance to them. The key components of this technique are presented in detail, including how: (1) a group processor helps viewers become aware of their perceptions of the mimes' behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and intentions; (2) the processor also assists viewers in deciding what they would do if they were in the mimed situation; (3) situations are structured to treat material in the lives of viewers; and (4) viewers are invited to restructure mimed situations in order to see their own situations from a different perspective. To illustrate the technique, three counselmime skits are described, one for parents of young handicapped people to expand their awareness of their children's capabilities, one for learning disabled youths to provide a more realistic world view, and one for counselors to learn to cope with stress and burnout. The use of mime in counseling is emphasized as a potent tool that assists the client in achieving the counseling goals of becoming less defensive and more aware. Preliminary studies are cited that suggest that counselmime is most successful with children and that recommend further research to fully evaluate its potentiality. (Author/PAS)

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# Mime as a Career and Life Style Planning Technique

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Mime as a Career and Life Style Planning Technique

> "God has given his people gifts of leadership and if one of those gifts is to speak in tongues, perhaps another is the gift of speaking without words."
>
> Paula Breen

Communication between people involves the exchange of information. When messages sent by one person are the same as messages received by another person, communication takes place. The goals of Counselmime are to heighten self awareness, to enhance communication, and to enable viewers to cognitively restructure situations of psycho-social importance to them.

At the John F. Kennedy Institute School in Baltimore, Maryland, children between the ages of 7 and 12 who are two or more years behind in reading comprise the student population. These students, referred to the Kennedy School by parents, physicians, school systems and social agencies, are often viewed as having poor self images. Most of them have difficulty communicating.

There is considerable evidence that creative information processing occurs along several channels.

Visual preferences and openness to fantasy and feeling are as important to information processing as are verbal associations. Counselmime has been created as a method of helping the students of the Kennedy School to become self aware and communicative. Visual images rather than words are manipulated to produce mime sequences that serve to help students plan their future.

A skit designed for students of the John F. Kennedy Institute School has been built around the character of Mac, a learning disabled twelve year old. Mac has all of the learning and social problems that the Kennedy students have. They identify with him and talk about his feelings. They also discuss his needs and desires. When Mac engages in behaviors that will divert him from his goals, the students tell him how to correct his behavior. It is not difficult for them to plan Mac's future when it is sometimes impossible for them to plan their own.

Mac and his friend Adam refuse to look at themselves or the world of work realistically. The Kennedy School children assist them in doing so. By changing the behavior of the skit characters they

alter the consequences of the skit. From this they learn how to alter consequences within their own circumstances. "Mac and Adam" skits teach decision making in school, in home, and in a community of peers by focusing on behavior at school, in the family, and at play. One skit illustrating the latter is of children playing checkers. One cheats. The other hits the cheater. A fight begins. The processor, who can stop the action at intervals, asks the mimes to freeze and play the script very slowly. When Adam cheats, the processor asks the mimes to freeze and asks the viewers what Mac is doing, feeling, thinking and intending. The viewers reply that Mac stops playing, feels very angry, thinks Adam is cheating, and intends to hit him. Then the processor asks what the consequences of this behavior will be, and also asks if Mac could express his anger in some other way - a way that would lead to more desirable consequences.

Counselmime presentations are a potent counseling tool because they evoke deeper understanding and action than the viewers had before. One mime sequence is that of a physically handicapped adolescent who has only one arm, but wants to become a doctor. The scene takes place when the youngster, Lenny. comes home from school. Pretending to practice medicine by taking his mother's temperature, pulse,

blood sample etc., the youth demonstrates things that he learned in school. The mother goes along with the "game" as long as she thinks Lenny is showing her what he has learned, but when the youth indicates through gesture that he is serious about becoming a doctor when he grows up, the mother shows disbelief and dismay. She erroneously, perhaps, believes that a medical career would be too demanding for her handicapped son. Therefore, a well intentioned but misguided parent thwarts her son's development and reinforces a negative self-concept in him.

This skit has been designed for parents of young handicapped people. The processor leads them in discussion and helps them identify the behaviors and feelings of both Lenny and his mother. The processor then asks whether the viewers have ever felt and behaved like the mother in the skit, and whether they think that the effects on their children were similar to those on Lenny. This skit has proved potent for parents who frequently do not know the hazards of overprotecting their children, nor know where to turn for education and guidance.

A third skit focuses on counseling as a high risk occupation for burnout. One mime plays the role of a counselor while another plays the role of four clients: a depressive youth, an angry youth, a pregnant youth, and a psychotic youth. Between counseling sequences the counselor answers phone calls, teaches, refers to files, and gives interviews. The skit is designed so that counselor viewers can become aware of their own burnout and plan means of alleviating it.

The counselmime process is designed to heighten awareness in the viewer to thoughts, feelings, intentions, and behaviors. In the "burn-out" skit cognitive focus is on the overworked counselor. Viewers develop empathy for him or her. Since viewers are also counselors they obtain greater insight into themselves. After each client, the group processor stops the action and asks observers questions such as: What do you see the counselor in the skit doing? What feelings are being communocated by the action? What do you think the mime is intending? Have you ever been in the same situation? What did you then think, feel, do?

In a discussion session that follows the viewing

of the skit the group processor orders the action to continue and watches the observers as well as the action in order to help the group identify authentic emotions. Counselmime, therefore, has an effective component in the skit and a cognitive component in the discussion. Like psychoeducational dramas, counselmime skits have five components: 1) focusing on an issue, 2) indepth exploration of the issue, 3) climax, 4) resolution, 5) ending.

In general the use of mime in counseling is a potent tool, that reveals the "secret story" within people which is frequently not available to consciousness. At the same time, it gives the viewer a firm boundary of time, place, and material so that its parameters are manageable. By participating in the management, viewers learn to control part of their lives which are projected into skits. The processor/counselor can infer from the interpretation of the skits the pre-existing set of assumptions that exist within the viewers.

The white face of the mime, symbolic of dying to self and to one's own defensiveness, assists the viewer in becoming less defensive and more aware. These, of course, are counseling goals. The power of non-verbal communication when combined with the

verbal talents of a skilled group processor, provides a viable tool for counselors to use when working with groups on preventative issues and life style planning.

There is evidence that the use of the Counselmime technique has been highly successful in teacher and counselor education. However, Counselmime is most successful with children.

There is a growing group of counselors eager to experiment with this tool as both a career and life style planning technique. Hard core research is needed to fully evaluate its potentiality and its efficacy in this area.